A view from Gweru: 10 years on:

In Aug. 1998, 10 years after returning to Canada, my (then) wife and I were able to return to Zimbabwe on a brief family visit.

Among the extended-family visits in that whirlwind 10 days, was one in accompaniment with my wife's Aunt Violet to her older sister, Maria, in the town of Gweru. There I met for the first time, Alexander, who was Maria's younger son, and the younger brother of Elvis, who hosted me 10 years before in Arcadia. (As always, names have been fictionalized).

Even as the struggle for bare necessities grew ever more precarious for most Zimbabweans, it seemed that my wife's 'coloured' cousins in Gweru were among the ever shrinking minority who were fighting to maintain the old 'standards'.

Perhaps the following dialogue— reproduced from extensive notes taken the evening after—offers a glimpse of that losing battle:

1

"This country's gone to hell. Right down to hell!"

So proclaimed Alexander Gopal, my wife's 'coloured' middle-aged cousin, from across his mother's tidy living room in Gweru. Seated amid the widowed Auntie Maria's doilied shelves of knick-knacks, photos of grandchildren, Catholic Women's League bronze plaques and late husband's railway service awards— I nodded in sympathy with Alexander's tirade.

"It'd be funny if it weren't so bloody tragic. Sugar?" He tapped his sunglasses on the tea trolley before nudging the sugar bowl. His plump fingers showed little of thirty years gripping locomotive throttles. "Nothing surprises me about these blokes. Some new scandal every day."

Dravidian dark with expressive eyes, he resembled his late father whose black and white photo on the adjacent wall was surrounded by Rhodesian Railroad Service awards. "Soon there won't be anything left to steal!"

On the other side of the white sectional sofa, Auntie Violet fanned herself, flushed from the long drive. Her geriatric Vauxhall had taken 3 1/2 hours to wheeze us from the Madume farmyard to the driveway gate of her older sister, Maria Gopal, in the old 'coloured' neighbourhood of Gweru.

While my wife helped her Aunt Maria prepare lunch in the kitchen, Alexander broke the ice with the customary topics of presumed accord with a 'European' guest:

"Did you see in this morning's '*Chronicle"*?" Dipping a biscuit into his tea, Alexander nodded towards the side table. "Now the Big Man's wants to buy off the vets with huge pensions. $60,000 to start— and $30,000 a year after that. He's bought off all his ministers—they've all lined their pockets—not to mention the pockets of their relatives. He's spending millions propping up his buddy in the Congo, and now he's trying to buy off the vets. Maybe he's banking on a diamond mine up in Zaire. Pathetic." He stifled his chuckle with a dripping cookie.

"So, who gets the money?" I asked. "Are the Rhodesian Defense Forces ex-combatants included—or is it all just for the comrades?"

He shook his head. "You've got to be kidding, man. Do you think he'd do anything for RDF vets?"

"It must have been tough," I said, taking his cue that virtually every 'coloured' of his generation was a draftee in the RDF.

He glanced at Violet, who more furiously fanned herself. "It was a joke wasn't it, Violet? A hopeless situation by the end of it."

Eyes down, auntie Violet wagged her chin.

"I can give you—let me just give you— an example." Alexander wiped his mouth. "I was assigned to guard these railway workers repairing a bridge up on the Vic Falls Railway, up near Wankie. We knew damn well that the guerrillas were all around us. We knew there were even guerrillas among the crew we were supposed to be guarding. They were passing messages, crossing back and forth— right under our noses. One chap even told me: 'Look, Mr. Alexander, why don't you just walk down the tracks to the river and go fishing?'"

"I wasn't going to die for nothing, so that's exactly what I did. I went fishing! At that point it was a damn joke, I tell you." He pinged a finger on his teacup. "We were dragged into it in more ways than one— isn't it, Violet?"

"Ach, who doesn't have a story?" Leaning forward, Violet pitched in with an anecdote from her days as a matron at Victoria High School. With forearms jiggling, she described the letter, delivered to her by my wife's older sister:

"…It came in a blue envelope. I'll never forget that handwriting. It was in English— pretty good English too: *'Dear Miss Wilcox*,' it said, *'we know you don't hate Africans because we saw you at the wedding on the Mudume farm.'* That was Grace's wedding." She nodded her reference to another of my wife's elder sister. "*'We need 2 dozen khaki cotton drill pants, and 3 dozen royal-blue hats. Don't answer in writing,'* it said, '*pass the items to your niece.'* It ended by giving such-and-such a date when the delivery was expected.'"

She wiggled her toes. "At first I wanted to take the letter straight to the police. I couldn't sleep for 2 days thinking about it. I finally took the letter to Mr. Jubali, who was the manager of Jaeggers' Wholesale. He was a good man— rest his soul..."

She hesitated, kneading her knuckles. "Mr. Jubali said: 'Look, Violet. You'd just better do what they say. Start with a half dozen, I'll give them to you on time. Write back saying that's all you can afford now, and say you'll come up with the rest in 6 months…' I had no choice: what could I do?" She sighed. "I'll never forget that letter. It was just like they say—like someone grabbing your intestines from inside." She reached over to brush the leaf of the rubber plant.

"Maybe you should apply for the veteran's pension, Violet," Alexander winked. "You helped the struggle as much as any of the bloody comrades."

"$60,000, they get in as lump sum!" She cried, "and $30,000 a year after that."

"In a few years, $50,000 won't keep you in mealie-meal, anyway" Alexander smirked, "bloody toilet paper money."

Violet rolled her eyes. "God only knows what will happen to the little pension I'm getting. It's criminal."

"How do they figure out who qualifies for the freedom fighters' pension?" I asked.

"You can be sure that the politicians' unemployed relatives are taken care of," said Violet.

"Some will draw 2—3 pensions under difference names," said Alexander.

"It's no joke," cried Violet, "after independence Africans were coming forward with 2-3––even 4 birth certificates."

"True," Alexander caught my eyes, "2 or 3 birth certificates is not uncommon at all."

"Look— look at Sylvester!" Still fanning herself, Violet referred to my wife's father.

"How old do you think Sylvester is? If I'm 61, then Sylvester can't— he must be — he must be at *least* 71. More than 15 years over retirement age and still had his job driving for the Ministry of Health. All he had to do was make a visit to that 'brother' of his— that Mudume who's now a government minister. They produced a new birth certificate and made him 45 again."

She rolled her eyes. "And then there's the poor wife." Rubbing toes, Violet referred to *Ambuya* Mudume, her half-sister. "There's the poor wife— half-crippled— still doing all the farm work, Sylvester pocketing all the profits. He's rich, that man— no one knows

how much he's got… No, no, I wouldn't be at all surprised if old Sylvester was getting the freedom fighter's pension."

Her nephew joined in the bitter laugh.

2

After lunch and an afternoon nap in the spare room, which aunt Maria has graciously prepared for our overnight stay, Alexander offered to drive us to downtown to change money. From Barclay's Bank he chauffeured us from a travel agency where we purchased our ongoing bus tickets to Bulawayo and then to the Bata Shoe factory outlet, where T. bought a pair of over-priced sandals. Finally, we stopped at the Gweru Cemetery to pay respects to his late father. All the while the social bonding, Rhodesian-style, continued:

"It never changes. A thousand years from now they'll be blaming the white man for their failures…"

Swerving round a cyclist, Alexander bumped off the shoulder and braked beside a low vine-entangled wire fence. "Look, the truth is if there's dollar here," elbows on the wheel, he traced a finger on his open palm, "if there's a dollar here, the white man will steal 10 cents and leave 90. Now the African— the African— he'll take 98 cents and leave 2. Most of my own ancestors are African, but I can't deny the truth." Emphatically he switched off the engine.

"Have you thought of emigration?" I asked.

He scratched his belly and jingled keys. "I applied for Australia, a few years back. From what I've heard it's no picnic— not for blokes my age. I know people who went to Canada— Toronto. Bloody cold, right? Anywhere it's nice enough, if you find a decent job. One chap from Bulawayo I know came back from Brisbane after 2 years. He was a diesel engineer just like me, and he couldn't find a job cleaning toilets." He wiggled his nose and reached for a handkerchief.

Heads down, we picked our way through the broken glass and blackened mealie cobs.

"You wouldn't believe— not so long ago it was clean enough to eat off the ground here… So many neglected graves now. More and more by the month."

In silence, we passed monuments to a Wilson, a Hartley, a Hove and a Muzenda as we made our way to the middle of the Catholic section. Before a white marble cross, marked 'Gopal', Alexander slicked his tonsure. "We try to get over at least once a week."

The top of the monument glowed orange in the Capricorn winter sun. After repositioning a vase of fresh flowers on the chipped-granite bed, my wife bowed her head.

"Chillier than usual, this August," Alexander puffed cheeks and rubbed the knees of his jeans. "Let's take the back gate back." With a parting nod to his father's grave, he zipped up his windbreaker and led us along the fence.

A half-minute ahead, cropped grass and asphalt gave way to barer ground. Jolted by familiarity, we stood frozen for a moment before the fresh mounds and humps beyond. The expanse of crooked crosses and hand-lettered plaques was testimony to the AIDS epidemic, no less devastating than the medieval Black Death.

"My God," my wife whispered. As we hesitated in the fluttering of plastic wreaths, she lowered her head, eyes reddening.

3

The pair of black labs, which bounded forward, sniffed warily as we slid out of the back seat of Alexander's car into his driveway.

"Pooch-pooch-pooch," called Alexander, coming around to lock the gate behind us. "They're trained as guard dogs— but don't worry, with guests they are as gentle as lambs."

After introductory pats, we followed the dogs and their master along the inlaid stone walk into the back entrance.

"Beautiful garden," my wife gushed. She bent to take off her shoes.

"No, no, no— don't bother!" At Alexander's urging, we passed through to the living room nodding to the kitchen helper, who cupped her hands in greeting from the pantry doorway.

"Gorgeous," my wife murmured glancing from the grand piano to the stone fireplace.

"My goodness!"

Stepping from behind the French windows of the adjoining dining room, Alexander's wife, Rosie, opened her arms. She was slight and mid-40ish —somewhat lighter in complexion than her husband. The pleats of her dark skirt were immaculately pressed.

After handshakes and mutual compliments, we sat on the sofa.

"Will you have tea or a cold drink?" asked Rosie. In the doorway, the kitchen 'girl' awaited instructions.

"We're OK, Rosie," said my wife "don't trouble yourself."

“They’re off to Vic Falls first thing is the morning,” says Alexander, sitting on the edge of the piano bench and aiming the TV remote. “They’re taking the luxury coach.”

“Do you have your reservations?” asked Rosie.

“We got them this downtown this afternoon. We’re picking up the train tickets tomorrow morning in Bulawayo.”

As Rosie instructed the kitchen girl in Sindebele, we glanced around at the décor. There were freshly cut flowers on the end table and African masks in the corner. Above the dining room doorway was a bronze crucifix and even more Gweru Catholic Women’s League service plaques than on the wall of her mother-in-law.

“Your children?” I nodded towards the two large portraits on the mantelpiece.

“Jess and Eddie,” says Rosie. “Jess should be here. She just called to say she’s dropping by her boyfriend’s place on the way home from work. She’s an accountant with Pusey and Payne.”

“Pretty.” I noted that the daughter’s smile, like her mother’s, hinted to her Portuguese ancestry.

“And is your son also here in Gweru?” The portrait of the young man suggested more of a paternal inheritance.

“Yes, Eddie’s on operations this week,’ said his father proudly. “He got his pilot’s training 2 years ago with the Air Force. He’s stationed right here at the Midlands air base.”

“With the Zimbabwe Air Force?”

“That’s right.”

“He—“ I hesitated, I hope he’s not likely to be sent, ah—“

“To the Congo?” Alexander waved the remote. “Naw, Eddie’s squadron isn’t involved in that business. O, he’s well-enough treated, that’s for sure.” Alexander winked. “But let me tell you— you don’t criticize Mugabe in front of Eddie. Far as he’s concerned, the old man walks on water!”

I chuckled. Perhaps Eddie will manage to wrap the flag around a fishing pole— in the paternal tradition…

4

“We always catch the BOP Evening News.” Alexander hit the volume button in time for the drumbeats heralding the satellite feed from Bopupatswana, South Africa. The news led with images of a burning car.

“BOP News always has the gory detail,” said Rosie, scratching her nyloned toes under her recliner. “They show the corpses of gang murders and necklacings. Really, it can be quite awful.”

With the evening’s reportage rather tamer than usual, Alexander lowered the volume.

“There’s so much violence man, it’s unbelievable what goes on down there. Did I tell you that I was robbed the last time I was down in Jo’burg?’ He glanced at his wife. “I was bloody near killed. Right downtown near the Carlton Towers, 2 African blokes with a knife, attacked me from behind.” He wiggled his fingers. “Still have the scars where they slashed me. I held onto my wallet and picked up a rock,” he made a swooping motion. “The buggers started to run. Maybe I’m a fool, but there was no way those buggers were going to get my wallet.” He opened and closed his fist. “I was bleeding all over the place. There were crowds all around but no one lifted a bloody finger. Even at the police station a black cop said: ‘What you coming in here, man? This isn't a bloody hospital!’ The white officer who filled out the assault report was even more cheeky: ‘Welcome to the new South Africa,’ he said.”

Alexander slid to the middle of the sofa. "Honestly, if you think things are bad here, they’re worse down south. Far worse! The hatred—the hatred between white and black there… Really— you can't imagine."

In a ‘shushing’ look from his wife, he thumbed up the volume just in time to catch the drum tattoo for the BOP news international segment.

We watched until Rosie broke the silence. “So, what’s all this fuss about Clinton and Monica?”

“Politics, said my wife, “it’s all just politics.”

“Politics,” said Rosie in her Cape-coloured accent, “all BS.”

“They’re all bloody corrupt,” muttered Alexander. We watched in renewed silence…

An hour later, the groaning old Vauxhall, with Auntie Violet at the wheel reversed up the long driveway towards us. Behind the open gate Rosie and Alexander, waved goodbye. The dogs barked and leapt as the iron gate creaked closed.

1998, August, Gweru, Zimbabwe (Transcribed 2001)